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The White House Continues to Peddle Contra Snake Oil

Here comes President Reagan again, asking Congress for \$70 million in military aid to the Nicaraguan contras, with another \$30 million on top for "humanitarian" purposes. And, as had been his custom in the past, Mr. Reagan buttresses his request with lurid scenarios of what will befall if Congress says no: a tidal wave of political tumult rolling north through Mexico and into Texas; howls of glee in Havana and the Kremlin.

Chiming in with the president, Sen. Richard Lugar (R., Ind.) and a Wall Street

Viewpoint

by Alexander Cockburn

Journal editorial Tuesday demand a rerun of recent events in the Philippines in Nicaragua, calling for new elections there. Both Mr. Reagan and Mr. Lugar as well as the Journal editorial ignored such petty details as the fact that in November 1984 Nicaragua conducted free elections, pronounced by innumerable international observing bodies as having been fairly and honestly carried out. "New elections" would in fact be a forcible *coup d'etat* on behalf of the contras achieved at the cost of tens of thousands of Nicaraguan lives. What Mr. Reagan, Mr. Lugar and The Wall Street Journal actually lust after is Gunboat Democracy, which marches people off to the polls at gunpoint until a result satisfactory to the U.S. government is achieved.

Amid the thunderous propaganda barrage from the administration and its allies, some simple questions are going unanswered and even unasked. Amid all the pious talk about the "democratic resistance," whom is the U.S. actually supporting in its attempt to destabilize the Nicaraguan government?

It can be said at once that the contras are neither democratic, nor are they much of a resistance. It is not so much a matter of their having been unable to take or hold a single Nicaraguan town, after the sacrifice of thousands of lives and millions of dollars. Despite the fact that somewhere between \$12 million and \$16 million of the current appropriations of \$27 million in "humanitarian aid" has been spent (and the General Accounting Office is now raising awkward questions about where some of that money has gone), the contras cannot apparently afford even a pot of paint. Travelers in Nicaragua do not report even

pro-contra graffiti, even though such graffiti are the most risk-free and inexpensive ways of demonstrating discontent or active resistance.

The contras are not popular in Nicaragua because they are correctly perceived as being led by former officers of Anastasio Somoza's infamous National Guard, and have conducted their present campaign inside Nicaragua largely by means of terror against civilians. Report after report by human-rights organizations has documented the contras' savageries in detail, in affidavits that have withstood the most demanding scrutiny.

The administration's only response has been to denounce the investigators as tools of the Nicaraguans and to rush forward a Nicaraguan defector, Alvaro Jose Baldizon, with the claim that the atrocities are the work of Sandinistas adopting a contra disguise. Since Mr. Baldizon has leveled innumerable charges against the Sandinistas over the past several months it is very strange that he should have thought of making such a sensational accusation only at this late date.

There have been periodic attempts to clean up the contras' deplorable image. Edgar Chamorro, formerly a member of the contra FDN's civilian directorate until he quit in disgust in 1984, says that concern about atrocities prompted an effort, in 1983, to appoint human-rights monitors to the contra combat forces, equipped with cameras and tape recorders. These monitors were not popular with the contra foot soldiers and ended up taking disproportionate casualties. "We could only suspect the reason for this phenomenon," says Mr. Chamorro darkly. Exhibiting a nice sense of priorities, contra chief Adolfo Calero was reported in the New York Times last August to have said that it is "a delicate thing" to persuade the contras to "respect the lives of prisoners and pro-Sandinista civilians without demoralizing the fighters."

Such sentiments fortify the conclusion that the contras have failed dismally to substantiate Mr. Reagan's belief that they are the "moral equivalent of the Founding Fathers." This failure is enhanced by a report on Jan. 20 by two reporters for the Associated Press, Robert Parry and Brian Barger, that the contras are now heavily involved in trafficking cocaine from Colombia into the U.S.

Confronted with the failure of the contras in the field, the Reagan administration and a few Democratic allies have tried to invent a new contra force and a new contra high command out of whole cloth,

spouting concern for human rights and dreams for a new, democratic Nicaragua. Such attempts have the comic pathos of Dr. Coppelius trying to breathe life into his doll. However much talk there may be about the new united force (UNO) and however much Arturo Cruz, the most demure of the contra leaders, may talk about a new vision, the fact of the matter remains that the contras are in essence a bunch of thugs who want to return to the glory days of Anastasio Somoza. To suggest otherwise and to invoke the Philippines are to insult Corazon Aquino and those who support her.

Why is the Reagan administration supporting this distasteful and futile force, of whose deficiencies it is only too well aware? Because it hopes that somehow it can get the Central Intelligence Agency back into the business of training and organizing a formidable force, potent in arms, with a program satisfactory to The New Republic magazine and led by a crusader satisfactory to Jeane Kirkpatrick. It is not going to happen, even though—assuming President Reagan's request is defeated—the next "compromise" suggested by Rep. Dave McCurdy (D., Okla.) will no doubt involve military training for the contras to, as Mr. McCurdy put it, "preserve the military option." This is not an option but a disaster.

The proper course—negotiation—is now more favored by circumstance than at any time in the recent past. Eight major Latin American democracies, comprising the Contadora group and the Contadora support group, met at Caraballeda, Venezuela, and called for a Latin American solution to the conflict. On Jan. 14, under the leadership of Guatemala's new president, Vinicio Cerezo, the five Central American foreign ministers met in Guatemala and endorsed the Caraballeda document. The U.S. should enter into bilateral negotiations with Nicaragua and make genuine efforts to draw a treaty out of the Contadora process.

What is the alternative? Edgar Chamorro puts it succinctly: "Let us imagine the best-case scenario of the Reagan policy. Suppose, after years of protracted conflict—thousands more deaths, and millions of dollars spent—suppose the contras win. The fighting would not be over. The Sandinistas would fight on from the hills. . . . The northern contras would fight the southern contras. . . . and the Miskito [Indians] would fight whatever government for their autonomy. . . . In short, you would have the fragmentation, the Lebanonization of Nicaragua. . . . If the contras win with direct U.S. intervention, then we are back to 1928. Back to the Marines in Nicaragua and the creation of a new Somoza, a new National Guard and a new Sandino."